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ABSTRACT

The current growth in language study for business-related communication should be viewed as a two-fold opportunity: to extend the ideals of a liberal arts education to a broader base of students and at the same time allowing humanities students to gain skills useful in today's world. Just as the study of humanities can help create a more balanced individual, the addition of business and specialty courses to our literary curriculum can help balance liberal arts education. Teachers of literature and business recognizing the value of both fields can cooperate to create business language courses serving this purpose. Institutions offering business language courses often find that they do not diminish enrollments in literature courses and can even enhance them by drawing non-literary students to advanced language programs. Condescending attitudes and conflict between the two fields must end in order to meet student needs. The result will be individuals well-adapted to live and work in an international environment, able to engender humanistic values to enrich their own lives and the world as a whole. (MSE)

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TEACHING BUSINESS FRENCH:

ARE WE LEAVING THE IVORY TOWER?

by

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A PAPER

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TEACHING BUSINESS FRENCH:

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In recent years, foreign language study has experienced a tremendous boom. At least 30 states have initiated or restored foreign language requirements since the early 1980's and over 90 major colleges, including Yale and several state systems, have made foreign language study a requirement for either graduation or entry. (See Rohter 33). Enrollments are on the rise at every level of instruction. Much of the current trend can be attributed to the report from the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International studies which appeared in 1979, and indeed, this movement has been fueled by Congress and business leaders who are "worried that the inability of most Americans to master a second language has undermined the nation's commercial and strategic position in an increasingly competitive world" (Rohter 33).

The advent of language courses related to business and the professions almost directly corresponds to the overall increase in language enrollment. While a few innovative departments intiated such courses several years ago to try to attract new students at a time when foreign languages were in a crunch, most such courses have been developed in the 1980's as the result of an increased need recognised by students or even business departments, and due to pressure from business and government

leaders who contend that the traditional language and literature training was insufficient.

While the increased interest in foreign language study has been enthusiastically received by language educators, it has created some problems. Many college professors who have been trained in literature have been reluctant or even refused to acquire the necessary expertise to teach language courses in business or other professional fields. Furthermore, language teachers who have begun to teach such courses are often considered inferior to their counterparts who teach literature and culture. Business, contend these protectors of the Ivory Tower, does not form part of the field of humanities, and business language teachers may be branded as traitors, if not openly, at least subconsciously and through inuendos, to certain idealistic commitments. They may even feel guilty and embarassed to admit that they teach business French. The historical role that France has played in the influence of literature, art, and music has perhaps increased the disregard for business French courses over other similar courses in languages such as Spanish or Japanese. Major liberal arts colleges which have graduate literature programs in foreign languages have often been the most reluctant to adopt new courses related to business, due in part to fear that literature courses would subsequently suffer declining enrollments, but also due to a desire to protect the Ivory Tower ideals to which they are committed.

At the same time that language courses related to business are being developed, major companies are beginning to recognize

the importance of a liberal arts education for students entering the business world. In 1984, the Association of American Colleges and the National Endowment for the Humanities organised a conference in Princeton, New Jersey in order for corporate leaders to discuss the value of a liberal arts education in business. The conference participants published a report, which was circulated to hundreds of corporate executive officers throughout the U.S., in which they concluded that the study of the humanities can provide "knowledge and develop skills necessary for success in the business world." ("Liberal Arts Majors" 6). The report continues that the study of the humanities helps to build a strong foundation for a career in business by developing "strengths that scientific or technical training alone seldom provides--judgment, an historical sense, knowledge of other languages and cultures, recognition of ethical issues, interpersonal abilities, communication skills, intellectual flexibility, a capacity for interpretive and creative thinking." ("Liberal Arts Majors" 6)

In view of these findings, and given the current trends in language teaching, language educators need to recognize two important points. First, in teaching business French, Spanish, Japanese or any other specialty course, we are also teaching culture. Culture courses have long since ceased to concentrate uniquely on culture with a capital C, but emphasize many aspects of a country's society and environment. Factors governing business practices in any country are frequently cultural rather than legal. The formalities used in French commercial

correspondance, for example, reflect an aspect of French culture and tradition, rather than legally binding requirements of letter writing. The fact that many French people still prefer to purchase food items, cigarettes, newspapers and magazines on a daily rather than a weekly or monthly basis representes another example of a cultural tendency effecting business practices. The business French teacher must therefore help students understand cultural influences on business and not just turn the business French course into a lesson on vocabulary. We want students who can do more than say "balance sheet," "stock market," or "net gain" in French.

Second, in developing new programs, language educators and administrators need to continue to recognize the value of literary studies in a liberal arts education and the long range benefit of such an educatation for students who come through our programs. Barbara Bowley states:

> With the increasing recognition that ultimately all business will require an understanding of the international marketplace, the role of the foreign language educator will rapidly extend from the liberal arts college to the school or college of business. This extension will involve not just instructional services, but also participation in policy decisions related to the integration of foreign language and international studies. (9)

The increasing role of language educators in policies and program design of other departments presents a unique opportunity

and responsibilty. Coupled with the influx of non-humanity oriented students into foreign language programs, it allows language educators to influence a larger segment of the student population. We must not abandon our commitment to culture and literary studies in an attempt to satisfy the desires and demands of business students or faculty. In fact, we need to remain faithfull to Ivory Tower, Liberal Arts ideals in order to create the type of student that even business and economic leaders find desirable to employ, possessing the interpersonal and communicative skills and the interpretative, creative thinking abilities gained from such studies and increasingly valuable in today's business climate. If we do not, we risk the possibility of turning out the same type of business graduate as in the past who only has the added advantage of being able to talk business in French, when in reality we need to educate individuals who will be much more capable of living in an international environment.

In order to fulfill the needs of business language students while at the same time remaining true to the principles of a liberal arts education, it is necessary to start in lower division language courses. The emphasis on proficiency in recent years has resulted in texts which focus on developing certain elementary "skills". While language educators and business leaders alike welcome the movement towards oral as well as written proficiency, most of the proficiency-oriented skills found in beginning texts simulate typical tasks or situations encountered by tourists -- renting rooms, buying plane or train

tickets, eating in restaurants, asking directions, etc. While such skills are useful even for students who may some day live and work in France, they are skills that require a limited amount of communicable ability. For years, tourists have been able to travel without these abilities in the language and will no doubt continue to do so. While I am not advocating the elimination of these elementary tasks, other situations should be correlated with them which simulate a business environment or which duplicate other authentic, communicable tasks that an individual living rather than just traveling in the country may face. We are not trying to simply create a group of fluent tourists. For example, many beginning texts introduce practical telephone conversations. One can easily create telephone conversations that imitate office situations rather than making a reservation in a hotel or restaurant or calling home to ask for money. The same could be said for letter writing. Most texts, at some early stage, present exercices in which students are asked to write letters to an imaginary French friend. Although the vocabulary and formalities of business letters in French are rather complicated, one can introduce at this level some basic formats of business correspondance and even create situations where students could write business letters, using models given them. In an in-house French language program developed by Crédit Lyonnais in New York, beginning students were introduced to regular -er verbs by using discuter, effectuer, traiter, comptabiliser, and virer as models rather than danser or diner (Finel-Honigman 29). The possibilities are unlimited, and

students enjoy simulating such day to day situations instead of always imitating typical tourist activities.

The inclusion of business related exercises in early texts obviously involves additional voacabulary, and requires an evaluation of the vocabulary being presented. Last quarter, while teaching an Introduction to Business French course for third year students, I found that they were totally unfamiliar with vocabulary for typical office equipment, such as staplers, file cabinets, or computer related terminology. An inspection of beginning French texts reveals in fact that many, including, ironically, some texts which provide accompanying computor software programs, do not present words such as computors, software, or word processor, while at the same time introducing "confiture aux fraises" or "maillot de bain". Is it really more important for our students to know how to say strawberry jam or bathing suit rather than word processor? Newer texts that include some business related terminology all too often introduce it as secondary, less important vocabulary, which receives little attention.

Beginning texts should not stop with the presentation of more practical terminology. They should also stress cultural elements which govern not only daily life in France but also business and economic practices. Irène Finel-Honigman, who conducts the in-house language program for Crédit Lyonnais, states that "present-day language programs must not only integrate commercial and economic semantics, translation and stylistic skills, but also develop concepts in cross-cultural

training geared toward the requisites of corporate communication" (27). "The application of a humanities background," she continues, "toward a better understanding of foreign business methods and attitudes facilitates objective/subjective modes of communication and accentuates intercultural awareness" (31). Students form at a very early stage an impression of the country and culture, and cultural notes concentrating only on the typical French high fashion, wine, cheese, and tourist attractions will create a false impression and fail to prepare students for the reality of life in France. Wilga Rivers states:

> "Teachers need to go beyond the shallow culture of knives and forks, or sombreros and berets, to the discussion of ideas, attitudes, and viewpoints on contemporary issues and the reasons, embedded in the history and experience of the people, for much of their contemporary behavior" (39).

The concern for proficiency has also caused most writers of beginning language texts to eliminate literary readings such as poems and short stories. Less and less emphasis seems to be placed on the artistic and cultural heritage of France in these texts, as they rarely mention authors, artists, and historical figures. Recently, in teaching an introduction to literature class for third year French students, I found that two thirds of the students had never heard of Jean-Paul Sartre. Even a brief exposure in lower division courses to some of the people and events that have influenced contemporary French thought and society helps to develop a deeper understanding of French

culture, while at the same time generating student interest and encouraging future study. Beginning students can also write their own poems or other creative works given appropriate models to follow, thereby developing creative abilities increasingly desirable in the business world. We must not abandon the introduction of literature at lower levels, but instead, we should help students understand that if they are to compete in the current economic situation and live a more meaningful life in our increasingly international world, they must develop the appreciation and understanding of foreign cultures which a study of their literature, art and history will bring about. A creative, cultural education must accompany and balance the increased focus on business related skills.

Third year college courses and more advanced courses dealing with grammar, conversation and composition should continue to incorporate both practical business French material and Cultural (with a capital C) material. Even courses on business French or other specialized courses can and should include references to literature and art. The Crédit Lyonnais program uses traditional cultural films, such as "Le Médecin malgré lui" or "On ne badine pas avec l'amour" in their French classes for banking employees (Finel-Honigman 30). It is absurd to think that an American businessman living in France or dealing frequently with French colleagues would limit all discussions to financial matters. While the typical American working in France may not find a need to discuss La Chanson de Roland or perhaps not even Sartre or existentialism, it is not at all unlikely that, during a business

luncheon or other business encounter, the discussion may turn to recent books discussed on the popular French television program Apostrophes. Business French courses can enhance the interest and knowledge of literature and the arts by providing simulated conversations on related topics, within a business setting, or by incorporating names of authors or books into exercises. For example, in dealing with business correspondance, students can be asked to create letters between a bookstore and a publisher in which the names of literary works are used. Students will invariably inquire about the titles listed, offering the opportunity for a brief but informative discussion on the author or work in question. Or, a class could view a segment of Apostrophes, now available to American universities, followed by a discussion of the cultural elements of France which make such a program popular and which may influence commercial practices. International business students need to understand the cultural heritage of France and its influence on contemporary life. Granted, most business French courses have a limited amount of time and a wealth of material to cover, but cultural material can easily be incorporated into business related discussions and vocabulary activities.

The ideal situation on the third and fourth year levels is to encourage and even require students to take courses in literature and culture as well as specialized courses such as Business French. We must remember that speciality courses, as Rivers notes, are the ice cream on the pie (40). They add something that makes the students more marketable, but should not

be viewed as a replacement for other courses. Fluency in the language and a knowledge of the culture are essential foundations upon which specialty courses can build. In developing curriculum for new programs, specifically related to international business or international studies, which are coordinated with other campus departments, language faculty should continue to encourage the inclusion of literary courses in these programs. Such efforts will be severely hampered by professional schools and business departments who, as Mustapha Bénouis points out, do not generally recognize their students' needs in humanistic areas and may fail to see the immediate usefulness of literature courses for their business students, who already have a demanding list of course requirements to fulfill (16). Consequently, departments should consider developing new courses or modifying current literary courses to accomadate the non-literary student. Again, in the Crédit Lyonnais program, literature courses were offered in conjunction with courses on culture, grammar, and business practices. Some of the literature courses focus on specific topics of greater interest to the banking employees, such as socio-economic themes in French literature and comparative studies of financial themes in French and American novels (Finel-Honigman 30). Perhaps more importantly, as Rivers suggests, literature courses should be broadened to include all aspects of literature, including folk tales as well as great works of literature and any other material which will generate meaningfull discussion and develop analytical skills. Rivers also suggests that literature teachers abandon old, yellowed lecture notes in

favor of developing more creative ways of teaching involving student generated discussion and allowing students to relive the parts of characters or to write their own poems or stories (41).

Language educators must therefore view the current trend in language study as an opportunity, an opportunity to extend Ivory Tower ideals to a broader base of students, while at the same time allowing humanities students to acquire skills useful for survival in today's world. Just as the study of humanities can help to create a more balanced individual, the addition of business and specialty courses to our literary curriculum will add another component to the balanced education of our own liberal arts students. Business language courses therefore offer the opportunity for a perfect marriage between the Ivory Tower and the practicality of the modern world. In order to attain this union, it is necessary that teachers of literature and teachers of specialty language courses cooperate, each recognizing the value of both fields. Institutions which have begun teaching business language courses often discover that such courses do not diminish enrollment in literature courses and can even enhance enrollment by drawing non-literary students to advanced language programs (See Bénouis 14). Condescending attitudes and conflict between literature and business language professors must disappear in order to meet the long-term needs of our students, who will confront an increasingly international environment wherein a knowledge of professional skills alone will not be sufficient. The final result of this combined effort will be individuals well-adapted to live and work in an international

environment, capable of engendering humanistic values to enrich their own lives and make that world better.

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